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Your Flying Car Will Be Here Sooner Than You Think

Electric air taxis could take you to the airport in minutes for less than the price of a regular cab.

By Brent Skorup
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A helicopter booked through the Voom app in Mexico City, April 24. PHOTO: STRINGER/REUTERS

Futurists have been promising us flying cars since the late-19th century. They may be about to arrive. City dwellers in the next decade could fly from Lower Manhattan to John F. Kennedy International Airport in less than 10 minutes. Chicago families could escape the summer heat and shuttle above Lake Michigan to Indiana beaches in less than half an hour. These trips often take an hour or two on the ground, but electric air taxis will allow for speedy urban travel without the headaches of flying coach.

The air-taxi dream has been revived thanks to repeated high-tech shocks. Battery improvements are making passenger drone flights feasible. Ride-sharing and routing software, used by Uber and Lyft, makes complex fleet management possible. Technology developed for self-driving cars will one day automate pilot functions, overcoming the greatest hurdles to a flying-taxi industry: high labor costs and the risk of human error.

The industry is moving faster than anyone has recently predicted. Take Voom, an app that matches helicopter pilots with passengers. It started servicing passengers in São Paulo in 2017, and its rapid success led to a March debut in traffic-clogged Mexico City. In the U.S., Boeing recently announced plans to test a piloted air taxi in 2019. Uber has similar plans for Dallas and Los Angeles in 2020, with an eye toward autonomous flight.

Air-taxi flights are pricey today, but costs are expected to fall. A representative from Lilium, a European operator, predicted in October that its electric five-seat air taxis will complete the Manhattan-JFK shuttle for $36 a person, significantly cheaper than cab fares, and that the price will eventually fall to $6 once flights become autonomous. The

standard prediction, offered by Porsche Consulting and others, is for commercialization of air taxis to occur around 2025, but that may be overly pessimistic.

Bottlenecks for the U.S. air-taxi industry are now due to federal and state regulations, not the technology. Congress held two hearings about air taxis this summer, but the industry witnesses spent far more time wowing members—these are flying cars, after all—than discussing regulatory barriers to commercialization.

The U.S. has advantages, but its companies are falling behind. Chinese drone company Ehang conducted the first-ever pilotless air-taxi flight in February, carrying human passengers on a 9-mile route. U.S. regulations and busy national airspace will probably delay such flights for several more years. U.S. cities lack the helicopter infrastructure of São Paulo and Mexico City, and the proliferation of airports across the U.S. limits the amount of available airspace for air taxis. In China, which already boasts extensive drone delivery services, relatively "clean" airspace makes rapid development more likely.

U.S. lawmakers can help encourage investment and deployment. For one, air-travel safety regulations should be modernized so passengers can breeze through check-ins. Replicating the inefficiencies of the airport-security line would counteract the air taxis' speed advantage. Autonomous flights have no pilots, so air taxis cannot be hijacked, though other threats endure.

Regulators should demarcate and auction aerial corridors—virtual highways in the sky—as government auctions radio spectrum and offshore windmill sites. This would protect existing air traffic and create flexibility for air-taxi commercialization. Local leaders should also scrutinize zoning laws and noise ordinances that would forbid air taxis, which are notably quieter than helicopters.

Pressure on lawmakers to jump-start this futuristic mode of transportation will build. As Americans learn more, many will cast a gaze upward and realize there are empty highways beckoning in the sky. It's something to think about next time you're stuck in traffic.

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